

20 May, 2023

To: Ministers and members of new NSW government

Powerhouse Museum: What now? Issues, comments, suggestions ...

Congratulations on your success in the recent election, and best wishes for everything you stand for. I am writing to provide you with information about the former government's disastrous decisions to first demolish and move, and then totally alter the structure and program, for the historic Powerhouse Museum and its continuing contemporary context.

As a former senior curator, working through the 1990s and 2000s with extraordinarily knowledgeable colleagues, I am now a member of the campaign group, Powerhouse Museum Alliance, and manage its website: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/>.

For nine years, with hundreds of other supporting groups and individuals, we have been trying to persuade the former NSW government, and its single-minded arts ministers (preferring eg. lyric theatres, fashion...), to leave this state museum in the capital city centre, protect its significant buildings, and properly support it with funding and replacement of professional staff, as a museum of applied arts (decorative arts, crafts, design, originally 'arts applied to industry') and sciences (including transport, industrial design, machines and aircraft) – and underlying social history. As a state museum, and unique in its collection content, it needs to be easily accessible to visitors from this state capital, all of NSW, all of Australia and internationally.

Following the NSW State Election (25 March, 2023), it is now possible to identify reversals that may be made by your new government, to the destructive plans for the Powerhouse Museum initiated by the previous government from 2014. Even though the Museum was 'saved' in its Sydney city site in 2020, it is still unclear exactly what its future role is, or what its relationship will be with the proposed Parramatta venue. We want it to remain with its original purpose, on its current site, in its current buildings – albeit with appropriate renewal to better access the collection through exhibitions and related events.

This information update, below, was sent to hundreds of colleagues, both as individuals and in institutions and organisations across NSW, Australia and other countries, who have established important relationships with the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, and who have expressed concerns about our previous government's plans to firstly demolish and move the Museum, and then 'save it' while instead, vastly changing its role and program.

In summary:

- Keep the main Museum site in Ultimo, with management there – and not in Parramatta
- Core business to stay with '*applied arts* (industrial and decorative arts, crafts, design) *and sciences*' (including industrial and technological) and social history, as always!
- Parramatta to have own gallery and museum institutions (only adjacent Sydney city without its own art gallery; and it has very significant local/state history, and significant historical precincts)
- Encourage release of the secret design briefs and secret business cases, that supposedly identify decisions made or proposed, to date.
- Stop anything leading towards demolition of the award-winning 1988 buildings in Ultimo; encourage only appropriate 'renewal'; and keep the historic Harwood building as part of the Museum. Further to existing heritage listing, obtain heritage listing for 1988 buildings and historic Harwood building.
- Ensure that rare objects such as historical industrial machinery, aircraft and others, are not placed in jeopardy by inappropriate removal to other locations, including distant Castle Hill.
- Discourage adoption of directions being given by property developers, and even universities in each location taking advantage of possible venue access for their own purposes.

Despite the Powerhouse Museum's website <https://www.maas.museum/powerhouse-renewal/> now identifying the historic Ultimo site as a location for exhibitions of 'applied arts and sciences' from the collection and beyond, rather than the controversially formerly cited museum of 'fashion and design' or even 'lyric theatre', there remain many serious concerns. Our website has recorded significant articles and news reports, as well as documenting government inquiries, recent research and serious issues. **Read here!! Powerhouse Museum Alliance:**

See: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/news-chronology-2023-on/>

And: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/letters-to-the-editor/>

And: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/museum-plans-and-problems-into-2023/>

And: <https://www.facebook.com/Powerhouse-Museum-Alliance-325023714672917>

Refer overall to: <https://powerhousemuseumalliance.com/> including links to two long-term Inquiries, and documents about the museum's history and heritage!

Follow up notes for current government members and ministers:

The following notes are based on summaries of 9 years of research and documentation by many individuals as well as those in lobby groups including: the Powerhouse Museum Alliance; Save the Powerhouse Facebook; North Parramatta Residents Action group; Campaign to Save the Powerhouse and many others. These informed advocates for retaining the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo as a Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), make the following points, and recommend that we continue to raise these with you.

- We call for a genuine renewal of the unique Powerhouse Museum, which must remain in Ultimo in the Sydney CBD, its home since 1893 and as the central site for the MAAS, as it is a state museum and must be accessible to a wide range of audiences. It must remain identified as a Museum. Under various recent directors it has changed access, exhibition content and staff.
- While a museum engages audiences in a range of stimulating ways, it must not be just a city-based arts pop-up or entertainment adjunct to the proposed 'Parramatta Powerhouse', currently under early construction on a site where a historic building was demolished.
- Responding to what regional Parramatta people are asking for, the 'Powerhouse Parramatta' should be reoriented in their location as a Parramatta Art Gallery, with a Parramatta Museum for its own notable history, as in other adjacent city centres. They didn't ask for the Powerhouse Museum; it was thrust on them.
- The Powerhouse Museum must be renewed as a Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, displaying and providing insightful information based on its collection, about science, engineering, transport, innovation, social history, decorative arts, crafts and design, across past to present. This is a unique combination of interconnecting collections.
- The government must cancel the \$500 million wasteful and destructive secret demolition plans for the potential 'Ultimo Creative Industries Precinct', where the Museum is being stripped largely of its collections and professional staff. These buildings include the most appropriate and safest spaces for significant large industrial and transport items, as well as extensive collections of smaller objects.
- As well as renewal of some facilities and spaces, the Museum also needs adequate continuing program funding, as well as for professional staff who have museum backgrounds and understand the collection and its audiences, to replace the many who are no longer employed.
- It is not at all clear who has made the current decisions: Museum senior management (how many have museum backgrounds; are they told what to do)? Board of Trustees (no museum members)? Create NSW government department? Arts Ministers in recent years? Who has been responsible?

- Their documents appear to be secret, and need exposing. They have ignored outcomes of two government Inquiries and several community consultation sessions. Any further work on the 'Powerhouse Ultimo' demolition and design scheme must be stopped until the new government has seen, and allowed public access to, all the design briefs and related decision-making documents.
- State Heritage Listing of the whole PHM Ultimo site (not just the old powerhouse buildings) is an urgent priority, and attention is drawn to the new government's agreement to seek release of heritage listing documents, secret design briefs and any agreements for the PHM at Ultimo, and the secret business cases for both Parramatta and Ultimo.
- Contrary to current design plans, along with the earlier historic buildings this renewal must retain, not demolish, the important 1988 Sulman award-winning buildings, of Wran building and galleria, and include them in state heritage listing.
- The adjacent historic Harwood tramshed building must also be heritage listed, and retained to continue its functions as an integral part of the PHM's history, design and project operations.
- Controversially, the entire collection has been removed to distant storage at Castle Hill, with concerns expressed about the danger of transportation for many items, and access for museum staff as well as audiences. Many collection and exhibition-based staff are being relocated there, and to Parramatta. Can we rely on such difficult access arrangements?

So – what is the Powerhouse Museum really heading for, and how can we contribute by passing on what we have experienced in the past and expect in the future?

With regards – and many thanks,



Grace Cochrane AM
(Powerhouse Museum Alliance web and Facebook editor)